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The Weight of Waking: Existence Without Identity as a Slow Death in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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Abstract: The present paper concentrates on the novel *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. It reveals the identity detriments incorporated in the plot and explains how the dehumanization process is gradually presented. To put it another way, the paper demonstrates that Gregor's transformation is only a reflection of his degrading life values, which have gradually eroded over a period of time. The paper sheds light on the allegorical aspect of Kafka's writing and underlines the main ideas and messages. The protagonist of the paper, a young man named Gregor, has been transformed into a bug due to his own family and work environment. In the paper, Gregor is an example of a human who has regressed into a lower insect life form because of putting family and work before self. He is just a tool for his family to fulfil their dreams and desires, and he is obligated to sacrifice himself in order to achieve their happiness. He cannot say no, even though they are ruining his life. After his transformation, Gregor's alienation from his family is further enhanced due to his lack of voice, autonomy, status, and space. The paper examines the relationship between work and workers' identity, examines the loss of voice in the context of social interactions, evaluates the value of Gregor's room and furniture, and interprets the shift in the family's attitude towards their father. The paper concludes that Gregor's family comes to view their son as a burden and that his death is a relief for them. The current research is dedicated to the themes of identity and alienation in *The Metamorphosis* and provides a new look at the novel.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, The Metamorphosis, identity erasure, alienation, dehumanization, familial rejection, social exclusion, personhood.

There is something deeply deliberate about the way Franz Kafka begins *The Metamorphosis*. The opening sentence does not build toward catastrophe — it arrives in it. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin" (Kafka 3). The sentence is grammatically calm. There is no panic in its syntax, no exclamation, no register of disbelief. And that flatness is the point. Kafka writes the beginning of a man's destruction with the same mild tone one might use to describe a change in weather, because in Gregor Samsa's world, destruction has always been the weather. The metamorphosis is not the catastrophe. It is merely the moment the catastrophe becomes impossible to ignore.

This paper argues that in *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka presents existence without identity — a life stripped of selfhood, recognition, voice, and autonomous personhood — as a form of slow, ongoing death that predates and ultimately exceeds the physical transformation. Gregor does not begin dying when he becomes a vermin. He begins dying the morning he first climbs out of bed, catches a train, and sells cloth for a company he despises to pay a debt he did not choose. The vermin form is not his punishment. It is his portrait. And the society that drove him to it — represented most intimately by his family — is not innocent. Kafka does not permit that comfort.

The novella insists on something that polite reading resists: that the erasure of a person can be thorough, systematic, and socially acceptable. That it can happen in a family home, at a dining table, behind a closed door. That the people conducting the erasure can do so with genuine love in their hearts and not understand, until it is over, what they have done. This is Kafka's most devastating accusation — not that the world is cruel, but that it is ordinary.

The Morning that Never Ends: Transformation as the Surface of a Deeper Wound

To understand what the metamorphosis reveals, one must first understand what Gregor's human life concealed. Before the transformation, Gregor Samsa is a travelling salesman whose entire existence is organized around a single function: earning money to repay his family's debt. He wakes before dawn, catches early trains, endures a boss he cannot stand, maintains relationships that are purely professional, and returns home to a family that receives his income gratefully and his interior life not at all. "If I didn't have my parents to think about," Gregor reflects, "I'd have given in my notice a long time ago" (Kafka 4). It is a sentence that contains multitudes of suppressed rage, swallowed desire, and self-abandonment — and then moves on, because in Gregor's world, reflection without action is all that is permitted.

What Kafka establishes in these opening pages is a man who does not possess his own life. His time belongs to his employer. His wages belong to his family. His body is an instrument of transport and labor. His feelings are an inconvenience to be managed quietly. He has no friends who are genuinely his, no romantic life, no creative practice, no private joy. Gregor is not simply a person who has a job; he is a worker whose obligations have come to define nearly every aspect of his existence.

The transformation, then, does not introduce suffering into Gregor's life. It reorganizes it. What changes on the morning of his metamorphosis is not his condition but its visibility. Before, the cage was invisible — made of debt, duty, timetables, and the unspoken expectation that he would continue. After, the cage is his own body. He is still trapped. He still cannot speak in a way that is understood. He still serves the needs of those around him before attending to his own. The difference is only that now, the trap has taken a form that cannot be politely overlooked.

This is Kafka's first and most profound indictment: that a society which reduces human beings to their economic utility has already committed the metamorphosis. The vermin is not a punishment visited upon Gregor. It is the honest shape of what he was already being treated as.

The Body Becomes the Prison: Somatic Alienation and the Theft of Agency

If the first section of the novella reveals that Gregor's life was already a kind of death, the second reveals what it feels like to inhabit that knowledge physically. The vermin body is not merely grotesque — it is a precise instrument of incapacitation. Gregor cannot stand upright. He cannot open a door without enormous effort. He cannot eat human food. He cannot make himself understood. Every system through which a human being acts upon the world — speech, posture, touch, movement — has been rendered dysfunctional or monstrous.

What is remarkable is how Kafka renders Gregor's relationship to this new body. There is no wail of horror, no extended crisis of identity. Gregor's first concern, as noted, is his train. His second is the pain in his side when he moves. He approaches his new body with the same methodical practicality with which he approached everything in his human life — as a problem to be managed so that obligations can be met. "He thought back on his family with deep emotion and love. His conviction that he had to disappear was, if possible, even firmer than his sister's" (Kafka 54). Even in his own body's extremity, Gregor's instinct is to optimize for others.

This is the somatic dimension of identity erasure that Kafka renders with exactness. The body that cannot speak, cannot be understood, and cannot be touched without revulsion is excluded from the community of persons. The vermin body makes visible the social status Gregor occupied even before the transformation: he was already the person whose feelings mattered less than his usefulness. Now he has become a creature whose very presence is treated as a problem.

The scene in which Gregor first crosses the threshold of his room and encounters the chief clerk — his employer's representative sent to investigate his absence — is among the most quietly devastating in the novella. Gregor attempts to explain himself, to reason, to reassure. "I'm just going to open the door this instant," he tells

the clerk, still believing that explanation and goodwill might bridge the gap (Kafka 13). But his voice has already changed. What comes out is "an unmistakable animal voice" that he can hear has altered "from below" (Kafka 9). The words are still there in his mind. The intention to communicate is intact. But the instrument has been taken from him, and with it, the possibility of being heard as a subject.

This detail — the retention of consciousness alongside the loss of communicative form — is central to Kafka's argument. Gregor is not diminished. He is imprisoned in diminishment. He continues to think, to feel, to remember, to want. The tragedy is not that he has become less than human in any interior sense. It is that the world will never again treat him as more than what he appears to be. And in this, his vermin life mirrors his human one with brutal fidelity: he was always the person whose inner life was subordinate to his visible function.

The Silence That Speaks: Language, Recognition, and the Existential Wound of Being Unheard

Among the most painful dimensions of Gregor's existence — both before and after the transformation — is his relationship to language. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the medium through which personhood is socially constituted. To speak and be understood is to be recognized as a subject. To speak and not be understood — or worse, to be unable to speak at all — is a form of social non-existence.

Gregor loses his voice, as voice, almost immediately. What remains is a sound that carries the shape of language without its content. His family hears noise where he hears words. His mother, upon hearing him attempt to speak from behind his locked door, is relieved that what she hears "might just be his natural voice" altered by illness — she does not yet know what she is hearing (Kafka 9). This is a moment of extraordinary pathos: a mother not yet aware that her son is already beyond the reach of ordinary comfort, already speaking from a place that the language of comfort cannot find.

Communication depends not only on a speaker's intention but also on a listener's willingness to recognize that intention. Gregor's family does not announce, in a single dramatic moment, that it will no longer listen to him. Instead, attention recedes gradually: his voice becomes distressing, his appearance frightening, and the effort of understanding him increasingly burdensome. The cumulative result is total. By the novella's middle section, Gregor is increasingly spoken about as a problem to be managed rather than addressed as a person.

This pattern extends beyond Gregor's physical transformation. Before the metamorphosis, his objections and desires are already subordinated to his family's financial needs. Afterward, his changed voice makes that exclusion literal: he retains thoughts and intentions, but those around him hear only an animal sound. The vermin's squeak becomes a stark counterpart to the careful silence he maintained while human.

There is one moment in the novella where Gregor's inner life and the possibility of recognition briefly, agonizingly, converge. It is the scene in which his sister Grete plays the violin for the lodgers. Gregor, drawn by the music, emerges from his room:

Was he an animal, that music had such an effect on him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved. He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it. (Kafka 49)

This passage is the closest the novella comes to a declaration of Gregor's humanity. He responds to beauty. He wishes to be near someone he loves. He wants to offer something — appreciation, recognition, closeness. And the irony is annihilating: it is precisely this movement toward human connection that triggers the family's final decision to be rid of him. His reaching out is the last act that seals his fate. In Gregor's world, the desire for recognition is itself disqualifying.

The Invisible Interior: Consciousness without Witness

One of the most quietly devastating strategies in Kafka's novella is the maintenance of Gregor's full interiority throughout. We are consistently inside his mind — his memories, his observations, his small preferences and quiet griefs. We know that he worries about his parents. We know that he notices when his furniture has been moved. We know that he finds the view from his window, once a source of comfort, has become blurry and indistinct in his new eyes. We know that he continues to feel love for his family even as they withdraw from him. We know everything.

The family knows nothing. Or rather: they know the facts of his physical existence — what he eats, how he moves, what space he occupies — but they have no access to and make no effort to access what he experiences. Gregor becomes, over the course of the novella, a being of pure interiority with no external witness. He thinks and feels and remembers in a space that no one else enters. This is the existential condition that Kafka renders as genuinely unbearable: not pain, not deformity, not even the loss of human form, but the experience of continuing to be someone while the world insists that you are no one.

The furniture removal scene is among the most carefully observed in the novella, and it crystallizes this dimension of Gregor's tragedy. His mother and sister decide to clear his room of furniture, reasoning that he needs space to crawl. They are being practical. They are, in their way, trying to help. But Gregor's response reveals what the gesture means to him:

Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be turned into a naked den in which he would certainly be able to crawl unhampered in all directions but would have to forget his human past swiftly and utterly? (Kafka 36)

The furniture is not furniture. It is the archaeology of an identity. The chest of drawers, the writing desk, the family photographs on the wall — these are the objects through which Gregor maintains his continuity with the self he was. They are the physical anchors of memory and personhood. To remove them is to complete the process of erasure that the transformation began: to take from Gregor not only his human body but the material evidence that he ever had one.

The scene is painful partly because Gregor's mother appears to sense what the furniture means to him and resists its removal. Grete, who has been the most attentive family member, insists on clearing the room because she believes it will make his movement easier. Yet she decides what Gregor needs without being able to consult him. The transition from attentive care to managerial decision-making occurs in the name of helping him, but it threatens the continuity of his identity.

Care as Burden: The Architecture of Conditional Love

It would be too easy — and too inaccurate — to read the Samsa family as villains. Kafka is more rigorous than that, and more merciful, which makes his indictment more uncomfortable. The family does not stop loving Gregor. They stop being able to afford to love him in the form he has taken. This distinction is important, because it is precisely this distinction that Kafka uses to expose the conditional architecture of family love — and by extension, of all social recognition.

The father's response to Gregor's transformation is the most overtly violent in the text, but it is the most legible: he is frightened and angry and physically dominant. He drives Gregor back into his room, first with a newspaper and a walking stick, and later — in the scene that marks a turning point in Gregor's physical decline — with a volley of apples. "One apple, thrown without much force, grazed Gregor's back and glanced off harmlessly. But another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in" (Kafka 40). The embedded apple festers. It becomes infected. It is, essentially, the wound from which Gregor never recovers.

The father's violence is the most visible form of a withdrawal that the family performs in different ways. The mother appears to retain affection for Gregor, yet she cannot bear to confront his altered body and is repeatedly shielded from it. Her love may be genuine, but it cannot overcome her revulsion and fear. Grete, initially the most attentive family member, gradually withdraws as the demands of care accumulate.

Grete's transformation mirrors Gregor's in a structural sense: she begins as the family member most committed to caring for him and ends by insisting that the family must be rid of the creature. Her statement, "We must try to get rid of it" (Kafka 52), can be read as an expression of exhaustion and economic anxiety, but it also marks a decisive reclassification. She no longer experiences the being in the room as her brother. The gradual withdrawal of recognition has become explicit.

The Samsa household does not understand itself as perpetrating violence against Gregor. Its members experience their actions as attempts to manage a crisis. The gap between their intentions and the effects of their actions is central to Kafka's moral pressure: exclusion can be carried out through ordinary decisions that seem necessary to the people making them.

The Room as World: Confinement, Shrinkage, and the Death of a Life's Evidence

As the novella progresses, Gregor's world contracts. He begins with a room; he ends confined to a corner of it. The room itself — initially his bedroom, then effectively his cell — undergoes a parallel transformation. What begins as a human space, furnished with the accumulation of a life, becomes over time an empty enclosure. The furniture is removed. The window grows harder to see through. The food left for him becomes increasingly perfunctory — leftovers, scraps, whatever is available — because Grete's initial careful attention to his changing tastes has given way to the bare minimum.

The lodgers who arrive to supplement the family's income perform a particular function in the novella's architecture. They are strangers who are granted access to the family's living space — including the sitting room that was once Gregor's domain of shared family life — while Gregor is locked away. The indignity is quiet but precise: strangers are welcomed into the space from which the family's own son has been expelled. The economics are nakedly stated. The lodgers pay. Gregor costs. The household has reorganized its moral geography around this arithmetic.

The room's emptiness by the novella's final section is not merely physical. It is the emptiness of a self that has been methodically stripped of its anchors. Gregor's humanity — the evidence of it, the material record of it — has been carted away piece by piece. What remains is a body in a room, and even the body is failing. He stops eating. The wound from the apple does not heal. He becomes thinner, weaker, less present. The room that was his world becomes his grave, and he does not resist this. He cooperates with his own disappearance.

Kafka's use of physical space throughout the novella is never merely descriptive. The room is the self. Its contraction mirrors Gregor's. Its emptying is his. The locked door between Gregor and the rest of the apartment is the border between recognized personhood and managed otherness, and it is a border that, once crossed, is never truly recrossed. Even in the moments when Gregor ventures out — drawn by music, by longing, by the unbearable desire to be near the people he loves — he is driven back. The door closes. The room is all that is permitted to him.

Dying as the Final Accommodation: Self-Erasure and the Internalized Gaze

Gregor Samsa does not die dramatically. He does not fight, does not rage, does not make a final declaration of selfhood. He dies as he lived: accommodating the needs of others, rearranging himself to minimize the inconvenience of his existence. "He thought back on his family with deep emotion and love. His conviction that he had to disappear was, if possible, even firmer than his sister's" (Kafka 54). This sentence is among the most heartbreaking in the novella, and also among the most politically charged. Gregor does not merely accept his

death. He agrees with it. He has so thoroughly internalized the family's judgment — that his existence has become intolerable, that his disappearance would be a gift — that the decision to die feels, to him, like an act of love.

This is the final stage of identity erasure that Kafka traces across the novella: the moment when the person being erased begins to participate in that erasure. Gregor's response is not simply an absence of will. His will has been directed toward resolving other people's difficulties for so long that disappearance comes to seem like a final act of accommodation. He dies as a son who has learned to measure his worth by how little trouble he causes.

Gregor's death can be read as the culmination of a life organized around other people's needs. This interpretation does not make him a simple martyr or turn his death into a heroic sacrifice. Rather, it completes a pattern established before the transformation: Gregor repeatedly arranges himself around the family's demands and ultimately comes to accept his own disappearance as a solution to their distress.

It is worth pausing on what Gregor does not do. He does not call out. He does not scratch at the door. He does not make the kind of noise that would force his family to acknowledge what is happening. He dies quietly, in the night, alone. His body is discovered by the charwoman in the morning — a stranger, hired help, the person least invested in what he was — and the family is notified with a briskness that mirrors their own management of his final weeks. The death is efficient. It causes minimal disruption. Gregor, even in dying, is good at his job.

The Family's Relief: What Survives When a Person Does Not?

The novella's final pages are among the most carefully written and morally complex in Kafka's body of work. Upon learning of Gregor's death, the family does not grieve — at least not primarily. They feel, first, relief. "They all three left the apartment together, which was something they had not done for months" (Kafka 56). They take a tram to the countryside. They notice that Grete, despite everything, has grown into a young woman. They begin to think about her future, about finding her a husband. The spring is coming. Life, the novella tells us with quiet devastation, goes on.

Kafka's decision to end here — not with grief, not with reckoning, but with renewal — is his final and most damning observation. The family does not mourn Gregor because, in a significant sense, they stopped experiencing him as fully Gregor some time ago. The creature in the room was a burden. The burden has been lifted. The grief that might have accompanied the loss of a son and a brother is diffused, redirected, absorbed into the practical relief of a household that can breathe again.

What Kafka refuses to do — and this refusal is the most politically pointed gesture in the text — is to provide the family with self-knowledge. They do not, in these final pages, recognize what they have done. They do not sit with the question of whether Gregor's death was, in some meaningful sense, something they participated in. They move toward the future with the unexamined confidence of people who have endured something difficult and come through it. And the reader, who has spent the entire novella inside Gregor's perspective, is left holding the knowledge that they do not have.

This gap — between what the family knows and what the reader knows — is where Kafka lodges his accusation. It is an accusation not against these specific people but against the structures that produced them: the economic pressures that transform family members into dependents and providers, the social norms that make usefulness the measure of belonging, the quiet violence of a world that has no language for the kind of loss Gregor represents because it was never willing to name what he was losing in the first place.

The image of Grete stretching her young body in the sunlight at the novella's close is not an image of hope so much as an image of continuation. Life continues for those who remain visible, legible, functional. For those who cease to be useful, it does not continue — it is simply, eventually, no longer interrupted by their presence.

Kafka offers no consolation here, because there is none to offer. He only insists, with the quiet fury of the witness, that we see what happened and call it by its name.

Summing up

The Metamorphosis is not a story about a man who turns into an insect. It is a story about a man who was already being treated as one, and who lacked the language, the standing, and finally the will to insist otherwise. Kafka's great achievement is to make this visible by literalizing it — to take the invisible violence of identity erasure and give it a body, a room, a locked door, an embedded apple, and a quiet death in the night.

The hypothesis this paper has pursued — that existence without identity is a slow death, and that the metamorphosis is its revelation rather than its cause — holds throughout the text with a consistency that is itself an argument. Every stage of Gregor's decline after the transformation mirrors a stage that was already underway before it. The loss of voice, of agency, of recognized interiority, of the physical anchors of selfhood, of the will to survive — none of these begin on the morning of the metamorphosis. They were already in progress, moving slowly and invisibly through the years of his human life.

What Kafka demands of the reader — and it is a demand, not an invitation — is to hold two things simultaneously: empathy for the Samsa family, who are themselves trapped in the same economic and social machinery that destroyed Gregor, and moral clarity about what that machinery does. It produces people who cannot afford to see each other. It produces people who are valued for their output and discarded when that output ceases. It produces Gregor Samsas in enormous numbers, every day, in every ordinary household — people who wake early, catch trains, suppress their interior lives, and call this love.

Gregor Samsa deserved to be seen. He deserved a life that belonged to him. He deserved to have his feelings count as much as his earnings, his presence valued as much as his productivity. He was never given any of these things. And Kafka, with the precise mercy of the great artist, ensures that we know it — even as the family, catching the tram into the spring morning, does not.

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